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Struggle for Selfhood in Alice Walker's Meridian

Abstract: Every struggle in one's life shapes one into the person they are today. Struggle is an unavoidable part of the journey in one's life, which helps one to know one's own self and purpose in life. Struggle for selfhood implies the hardships one face to have a distinct identity. The novel 'Meridian' written by Alice Walker centers on the life of a black woman and presents her struggle for selfhood against the background of rapid socio-cultural changes of the 1960s. It is a novel about the interconnectedness of personal change and movement for social change. The novel Meridian explores the concepts of interracial relationships and the idea of African American motherhood, African American male dominance and suppression. These themes are written during the time when African Americans are struggling for equality. 'Meridian' is the story of a woman, who rebels against the social standards that are set for African American by taking in unconventional ways and brings out the interracial relationship between African men and women. Meridian's search for the attainment of black womanhood at last turns into a concern for the survival and wholeness of the entire black community. She finds the true meaning of her life in her attempt to change the present social system for the benefit of all blacks, male and female. Walker through the novel 'Meridian' portrays the struggle of a black woman for her identity in the black society and how she achieves freedom.

Key words: Black Community, Freedom, Interracial Relationships, Selfhood, Struggle.

1. Introduction

Every struggle in one's life shapes one into the person they are today. Struggle is an unavoidable part of the journey in one's life, which helps one to know his own self and his purpose in life. Struggle for selfhood implies the hardships one face to have a distinct identity. The novel 'Meridian' written by Alice Walker centers on the life of a black woman and presents her search for selfhood against the background of rapid socio-cultural changes of the 1960s. A black woman who is a Civil Rights worker perceives the true meaning of feminine freedom and she redefines her role in the society. 'Meridian' is a matured novel, which celebrates a protagonist's triumphant emergence as a strong and wise black woman.

The novel 'Meridian' is divided into three parts. The first part of the novel describes her initiation into adulthood and the beginning of her searches for her black woman self. The second part focuses on her renunciation of her child and her active participation in the Civil Rights Movement. The third part deals with her release from sexual bonds with an accent on her greater commitment to the survival of her people. As Simon de Beauvoir says "One is not born a woman, one becomes one". (Beauvoir).

2. Semi- autobiographical elements

The novel 'Meridian' is a semi-autobiographical novel. The title 'Meridian' is the name of a character in novel and the novel deals with Walker experiences as being black woman. As 'Meridian' is Walker's second novel, it focuses on the relationships between African American men and white women as a threat to the identity and domination of man. Their relationships with white women are fickle because of their tendency to discard the women in order to convey

to the black communities ideal of what an African American man is supposed to be and who he should love. Here the focal point is on inter - racial relationships because the Civil Rights Movement is to lessen the gap between African Americans and whites in order to create equal ground for the two. Instead it has the opposite effect and leads to a wider consequences. This novel also presents the power struggle between African American men and the struggled white women, who have guilt over being white. Although Meridian is the main protagonist in the novel, the novel focuses on the universal figure of the African American male also.

Furthermore, Walker depicts Meridian as a good thinker. She is known for the freedom of thinking out of the possibilities of her life; she loves to teach at her home town or elsewhere moves outside, since teaching is her passion. She has no considerations, which she should do. She has a delight in her independence and an adventure in the fingering of her possibilities. She has been aspiring for more richness and texture in her life. She begins to look for more facility in her future life. She notices that the girls are falling in love and getting married. It seems to produce a state of euphoria in them. It seems to have aimlessness in life does not lead to become an independent woman.

Walker depicts Meridian's struggle for personal transformation as an alternative to the political movements of the sixties. The transformation Walker insists on is possible not through violence but through a spiritual awakening. One could do anything as long as it is done with white gloves. "In fact, Meridian and the other students felt they had two enemies: Saxon, which wanted them to become something — ladies — that was already obsolete, and the larger, more deadly enemy, white racist society" (M. 91).

3. The Role of Women in the Civil Rights Movement

In the novel *Meridian*, Alice Walker portrays the role of women in the Civil Rights Movement. She explores similar thematic issues, focusing on sexism within the movement, an often-neglected aspect. She also shows how African American women made sacrifices and individual thinking in their life and their freedom to join in the movement. *Meridian* begins her life in the traditional way offered to women - marriage and motherhood but finds herself in pursuing higher education. She becomes politically awakened, her involvement in the movement leads to a higher calling, resulting in a decision to devote her life to freedom causes.

Meridian has explored her experience in Civil Rights Movement in the American in a rather unique and unconventional way via the life of the novel's protagonist *Meridian*. Despite her ardent support for movement, *Meridian* is unable to fit in with the conformist idea of the Civil Rights activist and seeks to bring about social change and awareness in her own unique way. Towards the end of the novel her personal identity becomes part of their collective identity: "Meridian is born a new into a pluralistic cultural self, a "we" that is and must be self-less and without ordinary pre-requisites for personal identity." (M. 24) Hence, it can also be told as a story of love, courage and discrimination.

Then, *Meridian* participates in the Atlanta movement in order to escape the inner, more of a thrill than a social commitment. It thrills to think that she belongs to the people who produced Harriet Tubman, the only American woman who led troops to battle and the movement enables *Meridian* to have a taste of freedom especially in her confrontations with the police and through the endurance of physical tortures. As it is, black radicalism that goes against her temperament. Her womanly tenderness revolts through her mind and is running a small voice that screams, something missing in her. And the voice makes her heart pound and her ears roar. In love with Truman, a frontline worker for the movement, *Meridian* has accepted her as a helping mate or as an equal in giving leadership.

Mrs. Hill has a superficial assessment of the Civil Right Movement and she wants Meridian to opt for what she chosen for her. The following lines illustrate this:

“I just don’t see how you could let another woman raise your child”, she said. “It’s just selfishness, You ought to hang your head in shame. I have six children, She continues self-righteously, “though I never wanted to have any, and I have raised everyone myself.”
(M. 88)

Apparently, Meridian’s attachment to the Civil Right Movement is just a justification to her to avoid the role of the mother. She feels that has failed to uphold the tradition established by her ancestors.

4. Historical Perspectives in ‘Meridian’

Meridian’s story relates social, political and philosophical issues. Walker explores the effects of the burden of history of growing up in a racist society on the relation between black women and men, black men and white men and black women and white women in the Civil Rights Movement. Walker’s strength as a writer indicates her ability to write about topics that are generally taboo, to construct character plots that are often untouchable for mainstream writers and audience. Walker is an example of true representative of the movement and is knowledgeable about the history of the movement against oppression may be in her history and heritage.

Walker wants blacks to have the same opportunity to make as much money as the richest white people. But Meridian wants the destruction of the rich as a class and the eradication of all personal economic preserves. Her ideas are based on the notion that one

should be allowed to own more land than could be worked in a day by hand. Black people can own the seashore. Meridian reminds her professed admiration for socialist and communist theories that she is not seen happy and content in her life. Black rights annihilated by a higher white power namely, the authorities of Saxon college, however through the course of the novel, it is significant to dampen and extinguish Meridian belief in the possibility of achieving universal racial equality.

In their struggling for identity and freedom through disintegrated life-patterns, values and relationships, Walker's exposure of black woman's situation often attains a broader perspective of the woman's situation and still broader perspective of the human situation. Still the black woman's dream of a new world allures the young, making it hard for the new generation to respond the life and the repressive culture in terms of the old pattern of resistance, endurance, reacceptance and compromise. Walker portrays the black woman's roles as wife, mother, lover and illustrates why it is morally imperative for the Americans to work towards the eradication of racism and sexism and the institutionalized attitudes results in suffering and the tragic waste of human potential and lives.

African Americans are deprived of power and prestige but as a result they have developed a high sense of racial self-esteem and with this there is a shift in self esteem. African American pride led to incision and it also leads to forget the unique black identity of one that is westernized. In African Americans, there is no lack of true racial cultural consciousness because the values and attitudes as well as African American politics and so called leadership itself are all merely imitative of the European community.

5. Meridian's exploration of black identity and inter racial relationship issues

Meridian is a novel about the interconnectedness of personal change and movement for social change. So, the novel explores the concepts of interracial relationships and the idea of

African American motherhood, African American male dominance and suppression. These themes are written during the time when African Americans are struggling for equality. Now it is the story of woman, who rebels against the social standards that are set for African American by taking in unconventional ways. Another aspect in the novel brings out the interracial relationship between African men and women.

Meridian's exploration of black identity and inter racial relationship issues well below the surface of racial tension, primarily to its psychological and even spiritual consequences is clearly portrayed by Walker. Black people, especially black men are disenfranchised at that time. They are thought to be ignorant and suffered from the invisibility syndrome. For black men, the way to be accepted by whites is to be more like them.

Meridian's childhood and adult life has twisted her personal and social relationship, awakens her to a native freedom amidst social and existential problems, she can either fathom or come to terms with. Meridian's has reverse quest for self identity, which begins early and even before she is fully conscious of it and as a child resents to her mother's life of 'sacrifice'. Thus she begins her first journey toward wholeness. It is said that freedom and self knowledge come, when the self realizes itself in relation to the other, when it accepts the other as a sustaining force. In herself consciousness and self imprisoned quest for identity and freedom, Meridian prefers self- alienation to escape her agony of operation.

Meridian marries her lover and conceives a child. However, their marriage soon falls apart because she feels that to live merely as someone's wife means self-effacement, where her sense of freedom cannot ever accept it. Meridian sees marriage as a sanctuary, something which has cut her off from the outer world. Here Walker dismantles the image of woman as the submissive wife and with it the romantic stereotype of marriage as made in heaven. She does so not by creating the opposite image of dominating wife but by presenting the woman's need

to exist meaningfully in society in the larger context. Meridian feels the need of movement because the black woman is doubly enslaved by race and sex.

However, the guilt develops into an obsession that motherhood is an obstacle to a woman's emergence in her 'true self', her self-preserving identity in herself. "Meridian's quest for wholeness and her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement is initiated by her feelings of inadequacy in living up to the standards of Black Motherhood." (Tate 181) Meridian finds no fulfillment when she herself is entrapped into an early marriage and motherhood. To her, her baby is the disturbing "other": It can be seen in the following lines:

"Who are you"? She asked him
"Where were you when I was twelve?"
"Who are you"? She persisted, studying his face for some
scar that would intimate a previous life. (M.
89)

Meridian knows that enslaved women have been made miserable by the sale of their children that they have laid down their lives, gladly, for their greatest blessing from freedom. It meant that they could keep their own children. And what Meridian Hill has done with her precious child? She has given him away. She thought of her mother as being worthy of this maternal history and of herself as belonging to an unworthy minority, for which there is no precedent and of which she is as far as she knew the only member. In this connection, Stein illustrates the following lines:

"In order to live, Meridian rejects the temptations of
conventional middle-class life, the conventional
women's roles of dutiful daughter, wife, mother, lover.

But she must reject as well the contemporary temptations of martyrdom and false revolutionary consciousnesses, for these roles are death masks. While seeming to promise a fuller life or a greater self-knowledge, each of these patterns would obliterate her selfhood beneath the mask others have painted for her to wear.” (Stein 20)

As a child, she resents her mother’s life of sacrifice, her piety, her “tolerance shown to different beliefs outside the community”. (M.16) To Meridian, religion is a “withdrawal from the World”, a living in “constant awareness of death” (M. 16) A strange sense of guilt, that by her very birth and existence she is “stealing her mother’s emerging self”. (M. 20) This continuously haunts her.

Meridian is not an Existentialist, though pushed into a similar realization, finds her freedom-in-nothingness and is unbearable. She dissociates herself from the Revolutionary group.

“I’ll go back to the people, live among them, like Civil Rights Workers used to do”. (M. 19)

Meridian decides but in practice never has any sense of oneness with the ‘people’. Her seclusion at a small town in Alabama is more a self-revenge than a release into a larger life. She values her body less, attends to it less and so she does care much about it. With her vision blurred, her face wasted and rough, her skin turns shallow and unhealthy. She has occasional spells of paralysis both physical and spiritual.

In order to emerge as a new being, the individual self has to go through a continued process of reaching beyond itself through varied experiences, through multiple identities and relationships. The forms and faces of life and the world are paradoxical and mysterious, enchanting and horrifying. To respond to them through pleasure, sorrow, desire, despair, love, protest, acceptance and to absorb the contradictions both within the self and the world outside is to awaken to the wholeness of life and being. According to Mary Helen Washington, this crisis “creates its own particular kind of disfigurement in the lives of Black women, and ... far more than the external facts and figures of oppression, the true terror is within; the mutilation of the spirit and the body.” (Washington 135)

6. Meridian's struggle for identity

The awakening of a woman is essentially an awakening of the human soul. Her womanly sensibility, experiences and realizations contribute to it. The emergence of a new woman calls not merely for the realization of her individuality or of what she is but also of what she becomes. As long as Meridian struggles to establish herself against her surroundings, her emotions, values, relationships, as long as she views her personal, social and existential experiences as an impediment to her freedom and identity or sees herself as a separate entity, she remains entrapped in her self-centered self. It is only when she learns to accept life and her own self in terms of the opposites, only then she realizes that she has despair to love and hope again, that her emergence as a New Woman becomes a possibility. Her defiance subdued, she sees the road to freedom in a larger awareness.

Relating to these situations Karen Stein writes, “Walker's novel affirms that it is not by taking life that true revolution will come about, but through respect for life and authentic living of life. This authenticity is gained only through each individual's slow, painful confrontation of self.” (Stein 140)

However, Walker's black women are often like every woman. Meridian reaches her emancipation through and beyond her given and self invited situation, which transform her as individual woman. Walker's novel is influenced by certain events that occurred during the Civil Rights Movement. This movement sought to breakdown social barriers to claim equal access for individuals. Meridian challenges the image of a woman playing a passive role. So She refuses to be a woman of "mindless body, a sex creature, something to hang false hair and nails on" (M 65). She shows leadership qualities like males.

In fact, Meridian struggles for her identity. It can be seen in the following lines:

"Hers is a formidable struggle, for she lives in a society that domesticates conformity, that censures individual expression, especially for women; but she flourishes notwithstanding and evolves into a prototype for psychic wholeness and individual autonomy."
(Deborah E 263)

In connection to this, Barbara Christian writes that the main struggle in Meridian is that between a natural, life-driven spirit and society's deadly structures:

"Though the concept of One Life motivates Meridian in her quest toward physical and spiritual health, the societal evils that subordinate one class to another, one race to another, one sex to another, fragment and ultimately threaten life. The novel Meridian... is built on the tension between the African concept of animism, 'that spirit that inhabits all life,' and the societal forces that inhabit the growth of the living toward their natural

state of freedom.” (Christian
91)

Meridian’s struggle is in a way symbolic. “Her struggle,” says Walker “is the struggle each one of us will have to assume in our own way.”(Tate 180)

7. Conclusion

Meridian’s search for the attainment of black womanhood at last turns into a concern for the survival and wholeness of the entire black community. She finds the true meaning of her life in her attempt to change the present social system for the benefit of all blacks, male and female. Finally, Meridian emerges as a liberated black woman overcoming all the riddles of life. Evidently the novel brings out an image of the African-American woman with all her intricacy, multiplicity, and profundity. Hence, Walker through the novel Meridian portrays the struggle of a black woman for her identity in the black society and how she achieves freedom.

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